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ABSTRACT

The idea of a high level of literacy being important to holding the social fabric of the country together seems to be shared by policy-makers and professors, although they may disagree on the definition of literacy. Policy-makers like high tech; professors like book learning. Current trends in higher education reflect society's increasing dependence on technology. Educators must beware the use of computers and television in classroom instruction. Technology will not replace lectures and the basic book-learning knowledge necessary to critique lectures intelligently. Composition instruction, for example, targets effective written communication as a necessary component of critical thinking. But nowadays even professional thinkers of deep thoughts frequently fail to communicate--many educators use language that is imprecise, filled with abstractions and jargon. Their language is so loaded with meaningless "buzz" words as to be hopelessly obscure. Both computers and television should be used as teaching tools only with great care. A professor of computer science at Yale, David Gelernter, advises against confusing the means with the ends and blurring the distinction between teaching and learning. The declamatory tradition of the American language is an indispensable element of American freedom going back to this country's foundations. It has always involved the power of words to persuade and the value of interpersonal contact. No impersonal application of media or computers in the classroom can replace this tradition. (Contains 28 notes and 27 references.) (NKA)

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Making Technocrats

In his 1996 State of the Union message, President Clinton stated, "Every classroom in America must be connected to the information superhighway." He subsequently announced a two billion dollar program to put computers in classrooms all across America within the next five years.[1] The Vice-President of the United States, Al Gore, and his political rival, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich share a social passion. They positively gush at the prospects of an America thoroughly connected by computer and interactive television. The optimum goal for public education is one computer per kid in every classroom in the country. The information superhighway is coming and those in the control business like the idea. Assuming that what man can do he will do and that well-meaning free men see technology as a boon to human freedom, the future of a computerized society seems assured. Others, however, are less sanguine.

James H. Billington, the Librarian of Congress, accepts the inevitable but offers this warning in discussing the Library's plans to put its materials on the information superhighway:

> Our democracy and, more than ever, our economic vitality depend on the kind of active mind that the print culture-the culture of the book and of

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> the newspaper-has historically nurtured, and that television, feeding an essentially passive spectator habit, does not.[2]

What Professor Billington says is really old news. Studies have long shown the debilitating effects of television as an educational tool. Why then have educators embraced media gimmickry for teaching? The answer may lie in a fundamental miscommunication about terms.

The idea of a high level of literacy being important to holding the social fabric of the country together seems shared by policy-makers and professors. It does appear, however, that our policy-makers and professors may disagree on the definition of literacy. Policy-makers like high-tech; professors like book-learning. Educationists pander to the policy-makers. What is clear is that this disagreement will be resolved in our public schools. The stakes are too high for the professors not to triumph.

Political Scientists may worry about the implications of technology for human freedom. Psychologists may worry about the impersonal nature of technology. Sociologists may worry about technology's effect on community breakdown. Educators must worry about the profound effect that technology is having on book-literacy.

Unfortunately, the crisis in public education continues apace. Even since the much ballyhooed, though little read, report "A Nation at Risk" of 1983, test scores have continued to fall and schools have continued to fail.[3] Surveys indicate that most teachers now value computer literacy more than literacy. [4] Teacher-training has become technical training as though the computer could solve our educational ills. This complicates the problem of communication. The words are

wrong. Those charged to teach effective communication hide their ineptness behind an inane jargon. Technology then ceases to be a useful educational tool and instead becomes a benchmark of literacy. Computer literacy is not the same thing as literacy. Technocrats turn out technocrats. Understanding this distinction may be the most important challenge for education into the 21st century.

Current professional trends in higher education reflect our society's increasing dependence upon technology. Mankind caught in the maw of the machine is a recurrent 20th century theme. Antoine De Saint-Exupery wrote in 1939 that the machine is irresistible but that it need not become the enemy of spiritual civilization. It (the machine) can free man by "annihilating time and space." He went on to warn against confusing means with ends.[5] In a free society the ends of education are to produce literate critical thinkers. Computer literacy may well be a means to these ends. It isn't the ends. Of course, anyone who broaches this rather delicate subject runs the risk of being branded a Luddite, or in modern educational parlance being "negative." It is important enough to run this risk. Educators must beware the use of computers and television in classroom instruction. In a larger sense, technology won't replace lectures and the basic book-learning knowledge necessary to intelligently critique lectures.

Theodore Rozak bares the distinction between ideas and information. Ideas come first and computers cannot generate ideas. Information and ideas are not the same thing. In fact, an information glut may be the great conundrum of the 21st Century. Computers may inhibit the formulation of so-called "master ideas." Rozak contends that these "master ideas" are the foundation of culture and come from no information at all. "All men are created equal," for instance, has shaped

our society and yet comes from no body of facts.[6] Even the governing principles of mathematics and science (e.g. "the universe consists of matter in motion" or "nature is governed by universal laws") are not arrived at by scientific research.[7] On a teaching level, then, the process must move beyond information to the formulation of ideas (critical thinking).

Composition instruction targets effective written communication as a necessary component of critical thinking. In this, William Zinsser's caveat that while writing well can be learned, it may not be able to be taught is apt.[8] In trying, both the spoken and written word come together. American English is, for example, rich in declamatory tradition. It is from this declamatory tradition that we learn, as Garry Wills has suggested in *Lincoln at Gettysburg,* that words themselves can argue, define, and persuade.[9] It is an Orwellian twist that words can also deceive. Because technology now manipulates declamation, the expressions themselves are failing us. Beyond just the sound bite, the deliberate imprecision of our social discourse allows demagogues and technocrats widespread influence. In trying to teach composition, it is important that the teacher establish the crucial link between words and thoughts. The teachers themselves must bear the responsibility of failed communication.

Some basic dictums apply:

> Choose words which the audience will surely understand...Choose words with care to satisfy the exact requirements of the discourse. Veer to the short side in sentence structure. Then you will say but one thing at a time...For the sake of variety, insert an occasional longer but well-rounded sentence. Make each sentence express a distinct thought. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence. Be sure

> it is clear, simple, and to the point. Close it off with a concluding sentence which emphasizes and summarizes the statements in the paragraph.[10]

Too many students are programmed to respond to the jargon of political correctness, victimization, and bureaucratic double-talk. Imprecision creeps into dictionaries and affects social discourse. To avoid any hint of sexism, waiter or waitress becomes waitperson. Women becomes womyn.[11] The serious issue of campus bigotry is trivialized by any perceived insensitivity being labeled "ethnoviolence" including self-defined "psychological injury."[12] Fuzzy language begets fuzzy thought.

The trouble begins at the top. The professional thinkers of deep thoughts frequently fail to communicate. This excerpt from a paragraph from an article in a recent issue of *College English* illustrates the point:

> While we should not conflate the history of the academy with the history of the world, struggles for representation on campus can still be connected to a larger cultural map where the boundaries between (sic) nations, regions, identities, cultures, institutions, and subjectivities (whew!) are being everywhere contested or overrun. We can see these struggles and transgressions as what Mitchell terms "instances of reconfiguration and relocation of cultural and critical energy, reversals of center and margin, production and consumption, dominant and emergent forces."[13] (huh?)

This writer struggles with words. This is authentic academic gibberish, harmless enough among the intelligentsia, but frightening for English teachers. The words themselves get in the way of cogent thought.

Franklin Roosevelt once changed a speech writer's, "We are endeavoring to construct a more inclusive society" to "We're going to make a country in which no one is left out."[14] A patrician with a populist's flair for explanation, FDR said more in thirteen words than our academicians said in several hundred words.

The trouble then infects administrators and public officials who, one supposes, want to be thinkers of deep thoughts. A remark attributed to an elementary school administrator who was moving on summed up his accomplishments thusly, "We (editorial we) have empowered students and staff within the parameters of responsibility."[15] This official may or may not have accomplished something. The school may or may not have taught someone something. But the statement as it stands says exactly nothing. Maybe obfuscation is a disease endemic to school administrators. The state schools superintendent for California reportedly said, "Education...is where we enculturate people into the notion that we have a common culture..."[16] "Enculturate into the notion?"- remarkable even by bureaucratic standards. But it gets worse. Our current Secretary of Education explained his role in this wise:

> I don't think I should tell the process what the standards should be. I should be interested in whether the standards are challenging, not in the specifics of the standards themselves. We urge parents and others to become interested in the standards process.[17]

And to think some people are foolish enough to want to abolish the federal Department of Education (and lose this lucidity?). These utterings are abstractions. The explanation can only be either ignorance or deception-scary both ways. It is no wonder that the public lacks faith in public education.

The trouble reaches classroom instruction. Lassen College in Susanville, California recently received a million dollar plus federal grant for "strengthening institutions" from the Department of Education under their Title III directive. The written word in the grant would have failed an elementary school grammar class if elementary school grammar classes have not yet been "deconstructed" into idiom. The sense would gag anyone of sensibility about the teaching profession. The directions were threefold: more computers, more electronic teaching delivery systems, and more teacher training (for computers and systems). The underlying assumptions were politically correct. The grant suggests that most teaching is bad because it's the province of mostly white people who learned their craft from lecture-oriented professors in the 60s and 70s. Consequently, they teach the same way; ergo, they must be culturally insensitive, electronically illiterate, methodologically deprived, and generally inadequate to the modern mission.

With the impersonal words and delivery, education grows impersonal. Because (so goes the jargon) "traditional lecture-oriented teaching methods are increasingly ineffective with learners who are diverse in ethnicity, socio-economic background, age, culture, work experiences, and educational attainment," education must go electronic. This seems to suggest that since everyone is different all the time any attempt at education must subordinate itself to the machine. In a more sinister vein, it is also a bald attempt to cover

incompetence and inadequacies. Instead of further work in their respective disciplines, "many faculty members need further development in intercultural and interpersonal skills if they are to respond sensitively and effectively to much more heterogeneous student bodies and a wide variety of student concerns."

At least we know, according to the grant, how we got this way. It seems that "we systematically jumped through all the necessary hoops to get through traditional secondary, undergraduate, and graduate schools in the 60s and 70s." So we can't "relate." Fortunately, distance (read impersonal) learning is coming. Through "cooperative learning techniques" (read dumbing down) our faculty will receive training in "exciting new electronic learning methods" (read degree inflation). The purpose of the grant is to cut lecture-based teaching by 50% over the course of the grant.[18]

This jargon-ridden grant thus seems to deny two fundamental tenets of education: book-learning and human relationships. Not all learning is book-learning, but it is the most profound kind, especially in the formative years, and must comprise the definition of basic literacy. Not all learning is face-to-face, but it is the most profound technique and most basic educational tool. To view technology as an end rather than a means is to deny humanity. The kind of mindless swill embodied in this grant demeans minorities, cheapens knowledge, and embarrasses education.

The trouble is language. Rather than argue, the language itself befogs the issue. Just like with our previously cited academicians, it is so loaded with meaningless buzz words as to be hopelessly obscure. Words such as "diversity" and "sensitivity" and "concerns" (nouns) and "to relate to" or "to respond to" (verbs)

are what Orwell referred to as "colored" words, loaded with a fuzzy feelings of political righteousness. It has long been an Orwellian truism that silly language results from silly thought and vice versa.[19] Is this sophomoric document and its attendant program merely just the fustian of weird educational times? Our school adopted this grant and took the money attached to it without any forethought or campus-wide debate.

Nation-wide debate seems likewise to be lacking. An outfit called EDUCOM, which is a consortium of corporations and colleges promoting technology in higher education, wants to save schools money by redefining the professorial role.[20] Its president stated, "When the computer takes over the classroom, the professor becomes the guide on the side instead of the sage on the stage."[21] Schools have embraced the concept without forethought as to the very type of thinking which computers engender. Technical logic could replace political, social, and ethical understanding with all their nuances and vagaries.[22] The machine then will have triumphed over man.

Computer technology must perforce have limited application in the humanities especially. Interpretations vary as much as the human condition. Instruction must be opinionated and provocative in order to be evocative. No software package could possibly substitute for live instruction. No substitution of guidance for sagacity is acceptable. Individual thought would then become the victim. Teaching, in its best sense, encourages mental agility and the free form of testing ideas against human experience. Because human experience has infinite variety and because examples and associations are constantly new, no computer is agile enough to compute them.

David Gerlernter, a professor of computer science at Yale, advises against confusing the means with the ends and blurring the distinction between teaching and learning. He warns about using multimedia, hypermedia, and software programs as teachers instead of tools. He offers an important caveat:

> Most important, educators should learn what most parents and teachers already know: You cannot teach a child anything unless you look him in the face. We should not forget what computers are. Like books-better in some ways, worse in others-they are devices that help children mobilize their own resources and learn for themselves. The computer's potential to do good is modestly greater than a books in some areas. Its potential to do harm is vastly greater-across the board.[2]

Television also has great potential for harm. The College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin has lent its dubious authority to new avenues of educational folly:

> We have become a nation of television watchers. Declining newspaper circulation rates prove it. If TV is the way we absorb information, then using video as an instructional delivery mechanism...makes good sense.[24]

An instructor at Lassen said more than she knew in defending the trend toward electronic education. This instructor said that kids now play a lot of computer games and watch a lot of TV and that's how they learn, so that's how we should teach them. In a wild leap of logic this teacher blurred the distinction between teaching and learning in spouting what passes for the conventional wisdom.

These are precisely the arguments for bringing students back to reading and listening and conversing. In fact, ample evidence exists about the hypnotic and addictive effects of TV. TV is a "noncognitive" or essentially passive mode of learning which induces a "zonked" or pre-sleep condition.[25] Should not formal education be the one activity which rescues students from the debilitating effects of television? Some think so.

A veteran elementary school teacher in our community recently retired. She said that the most noticeable trend in education in the last thirty years has been how TV has robbed students of their imagination. This seems to me to be profound. The UC Davis experience provides a case in point. UC Davis attracts the best and brightest of California high school graduates, and yet about 45% of its incoming freshman class (1994-95) were required to take remedial English. Chancellor Larry Vanderhoef blamed TV. Research at UCLA has consistently shown a relationship between high TV watching and low learning levels among high school and college students.[26] At the same time that the California higher education system is pushing a "critical thinking" requirement, it is supporting electronic learning by way of reference to different teaching and learning "styles." Quality education involves personal face-to-face contact by those with something to profess with those who recognize the legitimacy of that profession. To say that teaching and learning "styles" differ is to say nothing. People differ. All people. All the time. Critical thinking involves imagination. California simply cannot have it both ways. The state cannot allow equal academic credit for electronically delivered courses and face-to-face courses while at the same time insisting on heightened "critical thinking" requirements. Its own research denies this.

In the most extreme setting, humanity itself may be at stake. The most horrific event of the 20th century was the Holocaust. As Albert Speer pointed out in his apology, *Inside the Third Reich,* the responsibility for this tragedy lies with a blind adherence to technocracy. Speer suggested that he himself and the German people in general became technocrats and book burners, and thus insulated from the human consequences of their actions.[27] Short of believing that the German people were inherently monsters, we must consider Speer's angle. Book literacy brings humanity. We blur the distinction between book literacy and technological literacy at our peril. The lesson for the 21st century is stark.

The declamatory tradition of the American language is an indispensable element of American freedom going back to our foundations. It has always involved the power of words to persuade and the value of interpersonal contact. This value is timeless. No impersonal application of media or computers in the classroom can replace this tradition. In fact, lack of human contact violates this tradition. As the *Los Angeles Times* columnist, Art Seidenbaum wrote:

> Prime time itself describes a universe of shut-ins. Prime time used to be when people quit the day's labors and went out among each other, to eat drink, or even serve good causes. Leisure was what a person wanted to do, not an exercise in being left alone with electronics.[28]

For three generations since FDR it has been the avowed intentions of our free people "to make a country in which no one is left out." Our language now seems to deny this. If teachers deny book-learning and embrace electronic gimmickry, then our civilization will surely suffer. It makes little sense to jump on the information superhighway in an automobile with four flat tires. Politicians must

take their cue from working professionals in the teaching field. Teaching involves challenge and provocation to meet high standards. Learning rises in response to these standards. Language is the key. Whatever the implications of the information superhighway, it is a serious question whether a free people can create an inclusive society in the maw of the machine.

Endnotes

1. Miller
2. Karaim, 49
3. Ferguson
4. "Teachers"
5. De Saint-Exupery, 47-48
6. Rozak, 92-93
7. Rozak, 115
8. Zinsser, 5-6
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22. Apple 52
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25. Mander 80-82
26. Richardson
27. Speer
28. McCabe 313

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